

Vdrome

Amar Kanwar

A Love Story

Introduced by Daniela Zyman (November 22, 2013)

A Love Story, completed in 2010, is one of the two films at the core of Amar Kanwar's recent project *The Sovereign Forest*, an ongoing, multi-faceted work revolving around the eastern Indian state of Odisha, which in recent years has become a battleground on issues of development and displacement. Shot over a period of ten years, as industrial interventions, chiefly of mining companies, have started to reshape and permanently destroy parts of Odisha's landscape and triggered fierce opposition amongst its populace, *The Sovereign Forest* proposes to reopen discussion and initiate a radical response to our understanding of politics, human rights, and ecology.



Daniela Zyman: One of the central works in the multi-layered installation work *The Sovereign Forest* is *A Love Story*, a filmic love letter to a once existing, beautiful and now extinguished place. It is about the things that are still loved, but which cannot be brought back to the here and now.

“The suddenness of your departure is still hard to believe”, a sentence which reappears in a slightly modified form in the second film *The Scene of Crime*, 2010, marks the film's beginning and end, visually yielding the narrative of a landscape destroyed to become a landfill – a nowhere place at the outskirts of New Delhi.

How did you come to start work on *The Sovereign Forest* with a love story, which in fact describes the aftereffects of industrialization, displacement, and loss? Why the aftermath, why a love letter?

Amar Kanwar: Sometimes the future is the past and the past is the present. *A Love Story* is the urban counterpoint and if you understand life as a straight line, yes you could see it as the aftermath, as you say, but our lives - inside our heads, within our homes and out in the public space never really unfold incrementally forward in a fixed direction. Therefore to answer your question, yes, the film *A Love Story* sequentially, cyclically and simultaneously, is the companion, the prelude, and postscript to *The Scene of Crime*.

Cinematically, or as a method to film, *A Love Story* was a passage through to make *The Scene of Crime* but it was certainly not the beginning of *The Sovereign Forest*, which is a project that began a decade ago.

As far as your question ‘why a love letter?’, sometimes I feel that it is only in the deep core of separation, that one can comprehend the meaning of life, of compassion. In order to enter this core, perhaps, we need to slip into a state of mind where we can momentarily see the bareness of the image, of human beings, of the inner life of nature. Sometimes experiencing the mind of the body humanizes the body, and it becomes useful to see or experience the poetry of love outside the territory of one's own comfort. For the poor or for the dispossessed or for the economic refugee one migration can often eventually mean multiple migrations. Multiple migrations often mean multiple separations. *A Love Story* and *The Scene of Crime* are both films about love, separations and loss across many dimensions of our lives.

DZ: Can you elaborate on the filmic methodology you have developed here- in terms of interweaving images, superimposed text, sound and narrativity, as well as your carefully composed visual language? A filmic language which has started with *The Lightning Testimonies*, 2007, a polylogue with various narratives traveling between and interweaving with different screens, and composed of different image regimes coming together to tell a deconstructed, non-linear and highly poetic and yet very political set of stories. It was then further refined in *The Torn First Pages*, 2004, where each filmic frame seemed to have been taken to the level of a painting, assigned a highly iconic status and edited so that each of the “floating pieces of paper”, which were actually the screens onto which you projected the films became mini essays but also started interacting with one another on a symbolic level. How can you describe this development and where did it take you with *The Sovereign Forest*?

AK: Perhaps it may be more accurate to say that this has been a process that began much earlier, with the film *A Night of Prophecy* in 2002, where an obvious attempt was made to understand the politics of power and violence, the history and future of many communities, and the so called nations in the subcontinent. The film sought the help of poetry to understand the passage of time and therefore the future.

It's not possible to discuss cinematic methodology without discussing at length the content of each film project and the reasons why such content emerged. Disturbance powers doubt. Doubt interrogates intention. Intention creates content. Ethical crisis propels form. The attempts to resolve personal, political and ethical dilemmas create the methodology or trajectories that you refer to. An inability to comprehend the brutality of sexual violence leads to my inability to find a language to express and to address these issues. I am also relating to various individuals, communities and geographical regions. The attempts at resolution also mean the repeated sharing of these attempts. And so multiple forms of silence and multiple vocabularies of archiving and recalling emerged over time in *The Lightning Testimonies*.

It was similar with *The Torn First Pages*. It is more about the attempt to understand the courage and resilience of the Burmese democracy movement. And the condition of exile. And the complexities of ethnic nationalities and tribes. And the inadequacies of narratives when attempting to understand large political movements. And an experiment in simultaneous viewing of distinct and multiple time as a method to comprehend this incredible resistance, spread across five decades and many continents.

Very briefly - *The Sovereign Forest* is about expressing and experiencing one narrative in one space but in multiple forms thereby creating an internal dialogue within the forms as well as enabling a viewer to relate with varied senses. This creates another kind of understanding of the part and the whole. And ones relationship within. It is a project wherein, for instance, different individuals could enter it through varied routes, one can withdraw and increase intimacy, can be silent and comprehend complexities, can look away and find oneself and so on. Apart from this - *The Sovereign Forest* is clearly and fundamentally a proposition for a transient evolving local space that can engage with issues of politics, culture and life. But that's another discussion.

DZ: “What is the vocabulary of a language that can speak of a series of simultaneous disappearances occurring across multiple dimensions of our lives?” Could you elaborate on how we are to understand this quotation? You have often talked about the structure of Indian oral and written traditions, including folklore, sagas, and songs as having an important impact on your work. What makes the Indian oral traditions so different and in what ways have these been important to you?

Also, you have been addressing the relationship between evidence and poetry at least since *The Torn First Pages* and have returned to this question in this recent work on Odisha and the relationship between mining, ecology and social engagement. An important component of this investigation in *The Sovereign Forest* is your inclusion of a large collection of locally grown rice seeds. This material evidence is presented in the language of a formal archive but simultaneously embodies a noncommercial and intangible type of oral knowledge, as poetry does. With evidence and poetry you also open up the question of politics and the immanent incompatibility of these two fields. Poetry deals with the imaginary and the symbolic whereas politics supposedly deals with so-called reality. In your mind, what is the relationship between politics and poetry?

AK: How do you understand the meaning of land? Do you measure it, multiply its dimensions and then calculate the cost according to current real estate value and be done with it? The 272 varieties of rice seeds in *The Sovereign Forest* have been grown and preserved by Natabar Sarangi an old farmer in Odisha. They are presented in *The Sovereign Forest* along with the films and other media. Each seed has an individual name, a specific purpose, a history and has been developed over decades with the shared understanding and experimentation of farmers. It is an extensive local knowledge system. How do you understand the value of this knowledge system? When mining, steel and power companies, giant agricultural corporations and real estate mafias fix governments and politicians and the police and forcibly take over land and destroy these traditions, as well as the local food sovereignty of the people – then how do you calculate the meaning this loss? *The Sovereign Forest* has multiple forms of evidence presented which opens you in many ways so as to allow you to get unique and varied insights, enhancing the nature of your comprehension.

Central to the notion of Crime is the question of evidence. When you look at any crime, it is investigated by an agency, which is the police or the criminal justice system of any society. Subsequently only evidence that is defined as permissible by the law, is allowed to be presented in court – all other evidence is dismissed as invalid. The carefully crafted text of the law tells us what is permissible and then how to understand and therefore what to conclude. But what happens if a crime continues to occur regardless of the enormous evidence available? Then is the crime invisible or the evidence invisible or are both visible but not seen? The moment you ask this question a new set of questions emerge. What is the scene of crime, what is its footprint? Is the crime always a single cataclysmic event or is it also something that expands and is an accumulating process? And finally which vocabulary has more capability to understand the scale and extent of a crime? If I do not understand the meaning of loss, its scale, its extent, its multiple dimensions then how could I even know what it is that is lost? Loss must have, it seems, I presume, perhaps, quite obviously its own unique language. I do not intend to deny the value of forensic investigation, in fact I am requesting a dynamic relationship alongside it, and outside the limits of a factual ontology with the hope of reconfiguring the question of evidence and therefore perhaps of all comprehension. There was a time when the testimony, in flux and ever changing, the anecdote with its insights, and the experience with its unprinted wisdom, were all central to the exploration and expression of truth. Everything else was added on to that knowledge. In essence, *The Sovereign Forest* attempts to bring the non-forensic back to the center of discourse, and the only way to do this was/is to experiment with ways of seeing, showing, perceiving, the opening up of, and a dialogue within, a multiplicity of senses. And so therefore a cluster of questions arises: Who defines evidence? Is legally valid evidence adequate to understand the meaning and extent of a crime? Can ‘poetry’ be presented as ‘evidence’ in a criminal or political trial? Can it create a new and valuable perspective about the crime? What is the vocabulary of a language that can talk about a series of simultaneous disappearances occurring across multiple dimensions of our lives? How to see, know, understand and remember these disappearances?

Oral traditions contain multiple forms of narrative that are fluid, capable of adapting and shifting between various forms of comprehension, description and expression- they can be surreal, factual, mythical, practical and so on, all at the same time. They have the ability to transform characters continuously and seamlessly destroy multiple boundaries between parts- living, non-living, and imaginary. And while they perform all this with grace and elegance they also continuously address memory and morality, sexuality and power, violence and ethics. And then they construct, conceive, create, mark and record transient physical spaces within which these narratives play out.

The significance or impact of such traditions is therefore, apparently quite meaningful. They help you understand and talk about your own self and of all life around.

Credits

A Love Story
2010, HD Video, color, sound, 5 min 37 sec

Direction: Amar Kanwar
Camera: Dilip Varma
Editing: Sameera Jain
Courtesy Amar Kanwar and Marian Goodman Gallery Paris/ New York